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ABSTRACT

Two teachers have brought gay and lesbian literature into their American literature courses at a large university near a major metropolitan area. The decision to introduce the works in traditional courses, rather than newly minted ones, was dictated by the university's fairly rigid institutional setting and the relative conservatism and timidity of its largely suburban student body, as well as by the desire not to separate such literature from traditional course work. The educators found that their methods differed more significantly than anticipated, although their aims remained similar. They felt that by studying marginalized writers, students could learn how other people reacted, and why. According to one of the teachers, it is straight students who need to read gay literature and get the most out of it. The other teacher finds that as a straight woman, it is easier for her to approach issues of homosexuality directly and to assign more overtly gay material without being taken as trying to "recruit" students into a gay lifestyle. The strategy that works best for one of the teachers, and that involves students the most, is to have students engage the work as completely as they can before bringing up the issue of homosexuality. Students have responded to the materials they read by expressing greater open mindedness about homosexuality. The teachers have concluded that when they approach homosexuality as just another textual and cultural factor to understand, students can begin to move beyond tolerance to empathy. (SG)

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A Dialogue on Teaching Gay and Lesbian American Literature

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Introduction

The authors of this article are both teachers at a large university located just outside a major metropolitan area. For several years they had independently attempted to bring gay and lesbian literature more visibly into their courses. Both taught a variety of subjects, one specializing in composition courses and the survey of American Literature, while the other taught American poetry. The decision to bring lesbian and gay literature into traditional course offerings rather than newly minted couurses was dictated by the fairly rigid institutional setting of the university and the relative timidity and conservatism of its largely suburban student body. It was also dictated by a desire not to separate such literature from traditional course work. To their surprise, they found their approaches and methods differed more significantly than they had anticipated, although their ultimate aims remained similar.

A Dialogue on Teaching Gay and Lesbian American Literature

Part I: Barbara Bass

The American literature classroom has traditionally been a place where university students study the writing of our canonized, respected authors and their contributions to our literary history. It is also a place where, more recently, students may be introduced to writers "on the margin" and may learn how their voices also contribute to our nation's literature. Through this literature, we open up a new dimension for students, introducing them to the richness and diversity of our culture -- an emotional as well as intellectual exercise. Here students also may discuss the social and ethical concerns that this literature often provokes, ideally, in a supportive, tolerant atmosphere. To provide this forum, according to Peter Baker in his article "Condemning the Thought that We Hate," "...is our ethical responsibility as educators, and one of the chief goals in achieving an educated society" (3).

The combination of values clarification and American literature seems like a good starting point for developing the tolerance basic to an educated citizenry. Here our students can learn of the contributions of Americans from a variety of backgrounds, most of whom slip easily into the syllabus. The culture that we studied in the past, says Barbara Ehrenreich, in her Time essay "Teach Diversity--with a Smile" "... was, in fact, one culture and, from a world

perspective, all too limited and ingrown." Multi-culturalism, on the other hand, "...is supposed to prepare us for a wider world" (84).

By studying marginalized writers, students learn, among other things, how other people react and why they do. They develop an understanding of the complexity and diversity of the culture and, we hope, tolerance and appreciation for difference. They also see where their own cultural experiences fit into the American "salad bowl." Their voices make America richer, and in most of the new American literature anthologies, we can find for our courses representatives of almost all cultural minorities, neatly categorized by ethnic grouping and chronology.

Almost all. Gay and lesbian writers as a group have not been included. One may find gay writers listed individually, but the inclusion of such authors -- Whitman, Thoreau, Willa Cather, H.D., and Langston Hughes, for example -- does not necessarily provide the opportunity to examine the gay or lesbian nature of their work. There is a distinct difference between works written by lesbians and gays -- and gay and lesbian literature. According to Richard Hall, in his article "Gay Fiction Comes Home," "In the last few decades...gay literature has broadened into a general, if controversial category with clearly definable patterns" (26).

Part II: David Bergman

Teaching gay and lesbian literature cannot be separate (and should not be separated) from the teaching of any other dimension of the literary work or from the ethical procedures established in the course. Let me be more specific. In my courses, I early establish two values or goals: (1) our first responsibility as students of literature is to understand every work as fully, richly and comprehensively as we can, and (2) only after we have tried to understand the work in its complexity can we begin to judge it against our own aesthetic or moral scales. Holding off our moral, political, aesthetic judgments is a necessary first step in making sound moral, political and aesthetic judgments. Of course, by suspending judgment I hope to encourage students to look beyond their prejudices.

Let me give you an example of how I uncouple moral and aesthetic issues. My example is very far from gay and lesbian literature. I teach Ezra Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" and T.S. Eliot's "Sweeney Among the Nightingales." What do we do with Eliot's lines in "Sweeney":

> The silent vertebrate in brown
> Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
> Rachel nee Rabinovitch
> Tears at the grapes with murderous paws. (49)

I explain that Eliot and Pound --as many in their day--viewed Jews with distaste. Sweeney's relationship with "Rachel nee Rabinovitch" is symptomatic of his corruption.

Rachel has tried to disguise her Judaism--she was born Rabinovitch no matter what she calls herself now--and the name Rabinovitch links her to the raven and the darkness that "drift above" Sweeney. Eliot's antisemitism is part of the intellectual history that informs the poem. As a Jew, I find this antisemitism repugnant, but my repugnance should not lead me either to dismiss the poem or to ignore its presence in the poem--two of the common strategies teachers adopt. My first job is to identify and understand how these textual references work within the poem, and that understanding Eliot's attitude toward Jews enables me to understand these textual references.

These same principles guide me when I'm teaching gay and lesbian authors. I bring up sexuality when such references help illuminate the text and are necessary for understanding it, and I present that information in as neutral a manner as I can muster. Of course, in America discussing a subject and advocating the position are not clearly differentiated. A student once complained to the chair of my department that I was trying to convert the class to Anglicanism because in teaching John Donne and George Herbert I had spent so much time on their theological principles. It is very hard for students to understand that it is important to know certain beliefs, whether or not one believes in them or not. Similarly, it is important to understand how a person's sexuality informs his or her art, whether or not one shares that sexual orientation. This is particularly true with homosexuality, where so many people

still believe one is recruited into it by older men and women preying on the young.

Thus, I try to show students not to erase their beliefs when they read, but rather not to let them strangle their reading, either. I try to show them to beware when they find that an author completely agrees with them, because such complete agreement is usually a result of projecting their own values and ideas on the text. I cultivate that fundamental principle of critical intelligence, what Matthew Arnold identified as "curiosity" (247). As an educated person I ought to know about Anglican doctrine, Puritan theology, African-American social practices, gay and lesbian attitudes.

Here I should state my personal belief that the teaching of gay and lesbian literature does not necessitate the instructor's coming out in the classroom. Despite some of the political rhetoric used today, coming out can be counterproductive. It gets in the way of our job which is teaching the students to understand and to appreciate points-of-view which may be contrary to their own. In fact, it is straight students who need to read gay literature and get the most out of it.

Part III: Barbara Bass

As literature instructors, it would be easier for us to stick with the so-called "safe" writers and "safe" subjects. But if we believe that basic to the university is an atmosphere of tolerance, then we are compelled to deal with

intolerance at every level. Barbara Ehrenreich says, "...homophobic thoughts cannot be abolished by fiat but only by the time-honored methods of persuasion, education and exposure to the other guy's point of view." We cannot impose tolerance on our students, but we can attempt to create an atmosphere that is conducive to creating tolerance by exposing them to the best literature from all segments of life. We all, however, must find a level with which we can feel comfortable.

A place outside the canon where I begin is with the work of Armistead Maupin. Maupin's novels fit Richard Hall's definition of the new gay literature by establishing "...the ordinariness of gays, their need for relationships and intimacy and their commonplace problems of fidelity, power-sharing, homemaking" (26).

It is difficult not to like Michael Tolliver, one of Maupin's main characters in his Tales of the City series of novels. Through him, students come to see that we all share the same human concerns. In More Tales of the City, the second novel in the series, Michael begins a letter to his mother telling her that he is gay in this way:

> Dear Mama,
>
> ...Every time I try to write to you and Papa I realize I'm not saying the things that are in my heart. That would be O.K., if I loved you any less than I do, but you are still my parents and I

am still your child... it is clear to me that my responsibility is to tell you the truth..." (159).

Regardless of the intent of this letter, students can easily identify with the guilt and pain Michael is feeling, his desire to close the distance between himself and his parents, his need for friendship, his search for contentment. Maupin's books focus on what gays and straights have in common, providing a positive approach to the difficult task of integrating gay literature into the curriculum.

My approach is much more active and direct than my colleague's. As a straight woman, I have nothing to lose by attacking these issues directly -- the students don't see me as taking sides or of trying to "recruit" them. Also, I teach a survey class of younger, less sophisticated students, and if I wait for these issues to arise subtly, they may never arise at all.

I begin this lesson by asking the students to respond to these questions in their reading-response journals before class: Why does Michael decide to write this letter to his parents? Should he have written to them? What does he want from them? And since they have written to him that they have joined Anita Bryant's "Save the Children" campaign, do you think they might change their minds after they read his letter? Why or why not? Also, since Michael writes this letter while in the hospital, suffering from a temporary paralysis, I ask them to write down why Maupin would put him

in this situation. When they come to class the next day, I ask them what they wrote, rather than what they think, thereby alleviating some of the tension and anxiety this discussion might provoke. These questions have spurred other issues, such as if it is possible to be both Christian and homosexual, why there is anti-homosexual prejudice, what do gays and straights have in common, will gays and lesbians ever be assimilated into the culture, should homosexuals be teachers, and just how should one value someone's worth?

After class I ask them to respond to this question: What did you learn from reading and discussing this story? The students are vocal here, too. One young man wrote, "I have to admit that when I read this I had already made up my mind that I didn't like it because it was about homosexuality. But as the class discussed it, I learned that having an open mind changes a lot of one's views. I know my views were changed about this story. I enjoyed it more when my mind was clear and open to suggestions." Another wrote, "...This was really the first time I was able to hear the side of a gay person. I never knew the pain they have to go through. This story really opened my eyes." Finally one student wrote, "By reading Michael's letter to his parents, I was able to realize some false beliefs I had about homosexuals. After I read this story, I could accept Michael as a human being who has the right to live his life the way he wants."

Maupin clearly demonstrates in his work that gay and family life are not mutually exclusive, that one is not the

enemy of the other. In fact, Maupin has said of his novels, "I like to see myself as part of the world at large. The books show gay people in context. They give their relationships the blessing of heterosexual friends, and make them more real. The bottom line is acceptance, love and understanding -- to show the richness of humankind" (Spain, 54).

Part IV: David Bergman

My colleague brings overtly gay material into class. I have rarely done so. It is not that I believe that there have not been explicitly gay works worthy of consideration--I'm now editing Edmund White's nonfiction prose, and he is, I believe, a major American writer--it's because I have so much to deal with that is canonical. In a recent article, Dinesh D'Souza, the author of Illiberal Education, wondered whether gay studies "...might steal resource from 'more fundamental priorities'" (Barcott, 27). I should think that Shakespeare's sonnets, or The Iliad, or Melville's Billy Budd are sufficiently canonized texts whose concerns are so centered on male-male affection that even D'Souza--were he intellectually honest--would have to admit the importance of the issue. I don't believe that we need a gay and lesbian canon of American literature. As my colleague said, with Whitman, Melville, Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Rich, H.D., John Ashbery, Tennessee Williams, and Willa Cather -- gay and lesbian writers have a disproportionate place in the established canon. What is needed is to make them visible.

But why should we make them visible? And given how short class time is, when should we discuss sexuality and when can such discussions be omitted? We should discuss gay issues because the texts are unreadable without bringing them to light. I was taught at Kenyon College, home of the New Criticism, and although I am not a New Critic, I find its pedagogical rules of thumb are helpful. I continually warn my students against reading biography onto a work. Biographical data is important when it is invited by the work. Thus, I never begin the discussion of a writer by presenting information about him or her being gay or lesbian--rather that information arises in the process of studying a particular work.

The strategy that works best for me, and I think involves the students the most, is to have them engage the work as completely as they can before bringing up the issue of homosexuality. Let me cite two poems where this approach seems particularly useful. The earlier is Hart Crane's "My Grandmother's Love Letters." The students usually get that Crane is alone in the attic, trying to make contact with his grandmother's erotic life through the medium of the letters. With some help, they get to understand that Crane wonders if the tables were reversed, would his grandmother be able to imagine his love life. The students often express the belief that Crane is being terribly hard on his grandmother. Why wouldn't she understand? they ask. And I turn the question on them: what kind of erotic life would grandmothers find difficult to understand? Often the

students are able to guess on their own, and--this is important--in so doing, they have taken the first step in understanding.

The second poem is Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems." The first of the series do not specifically, or rather explicitly, say that the interlocutor is a woman. But the imagery is highly charged. Number 11 reads in part:

> Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes
> making them eternally and visibly female.
> No height without depth, without a burning core,
> though our straw soles shred on the hardened lava...
> I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path,
> to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp (1329).

Who is Rich talking to? I ask. It is one of my standard questions in opening up a poem--trying to set the rhetorical context. In what way does the imagery inform us about the beloved? I ask again--and again this is a common enough task that they have done hundreds of times before--analyze a pattern of imagery. There is some silence. They are thinking. The last time I taught this poem, it was the full-back on the Rugby team who finally, rather sheepishly, ventured: "Could it be another woman?" For him, this venture into non-phallic eroticism and its excitements was something very new, very daring--and, I hope-- eye opening.

What I want to suggest is that one of the most radical ways of teaching gay and lesbian literature is to teach it as though there was nothing special about teaching it. Of

course we discuss such matters--aren't we mature, sensible people? Are we prudes? And when I approach the subject as just one more textual, cultural factor to understand, respond to, and evaluate on its own merits, I move the students beyond their often knee-jerk reaction to the subject, and into an involvement that should take them beyond tolerance, and toward some as yet unattained level of empathy.

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